

The secret lives of charter schools

E.J. Montini - Arizona Republic - February 23, 2013

Hundreds of Arizona public schools regularly spend millions of taxpayer dollars while refusing to disclose how the cash is divvied up.

It's an outrage. And our most powerful legislators will be outraged when they read this.

Not at the schools.

But at me for reminding you about it.

The politicians who run Arizona have no problem with the schools. In fact, they happily allow these particular public schools to keep secret the salaries of administrators and teachers; to have unelected school boards that can be stacked with the family members, and to hand out lucrative contracts to board members and administrators without competing bids.

Remember, these are not private schools. They are public schools, paid for with taxpayer dollars. Your money. Yet they get away with policies and practices that would send lawmakers into a tizzy if it happened in your neighborhood public school.

Why is that?

Because they're charter schools.

The Republicans who control the legislature despise regular public schools, and especially the unionized teachers who work there. So they treat Arizona's non-union, independently run charter schools as if they were private institutions using private money.

But they're not. They're using our money.

State Sen. Linda Lopez, a Democrat, introduced a proposal (SB 1305) that, among other things, would require charter schools to share salary information and follow state purchasing law.

The bill apparently is going nowhere.

Late last year a series of articles by The Arizona Republic's Anne Ryman exposed the private lives of public charter schools, pointing out the cronyism and lack of transparency charter schools get away with. For example, the Arizona State Board for Charter Schools grants exemptions to state purchasing laws to nearly 90 percent of our 500-plus charter schools.

I asked Clint Bolick of the Goldwater Institute how this could happen. Bolick's think tank fuels the brains of many Arizona legislators, who otherwise would run on empty. The institute also is a leading advocate of government transparency.

Except when it comes to charter schools.

That's because Bolick is not only a big-time lawyer for the

institute but also a director of BASIS Schools Inc., which operates a number of charter schools in Arizona. If there's one person smart enough to rationalize our charter-school double standard – or at least give it a try — it's Bolick.

"The whole idea of charter schools is that these are institutions that are less regulated than public schools," he told me. "If you suddenly impose all of the public school regulations it defeats the purpose of charter schools. One of the reasons that Arizona has the best charter schools in the country is probably because it is the least regulated state in terms of charter schools. The charter operator has the flexibility to make decisions."

Arizona has some terrific charter schools. That's true.

But this isn't about flexibility. It's about transparency.

A charter school can pay a teacher or administrator whatever he or she deserves. But it's taxpayer money. With other public schools we know what teachers earn. Why not charters?

"Charter schools have a completely different salary model than regular public schools," Bolick said. "Public school teachers are paid according to the contract that is negotiated with the union. For charter schools, there is an individual contract with each teacher. Just like every private employer wants to keep its salaries confidential, so too do charter schools so as not to create labor strife. Having the information made public will lead to internal turmoil."

Why would there be turmoil if charter school teachers and administrators, like other public school employees, understood that using taxpayer money makes salaries public?

"You don't want to weigh them (charter schools) down with burdensome requirements that could impede their ability to get the job done," Bolick said.

How burdensome is showing a spreadsheet with salaries on it?

How burdensome is it to ask for bids on a transportation contract rather than simply giving it to an administrator or board member?

Imagine the outrage of lawmakers if a neighborhood public school tried to get away with that?

The only outrage over the charter system, however, is directed at hacks like me.

For telling you about it.